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## CHEROKEE-IROQUOIS LITTLE PEOPLE\*

By JOHN WITTHOFT and WENDELL S. HADLOCK

Various types of dwarfs are conspicuous personalities in American Indian pantheons. Often they closely resemble European folk figures and might be considered as a borrowing from European tradition. Such Little People are so widespread in America, however, and often so isolated from a suitable European tradition, that a foreign origin seems improbable as a general explanation for their existence.

Cherokee tradition is rather conservative and has borrowed relatively little of White folk-belief in many of its aspects, as judged by published collections and our own observations among the Cherokee. The Cherokee Little People give one the impression that they are an integral part of a highly elaborated tradition in which European motifs are rare, although it may well be that important modifications of this tradition have taken place. The prominence of dwarfs in Cherokee mythology first gave us stimulus for this study, and later we looked for parallels and similarities in the dwarf lore of the Six Nations.

Iroquois Little People have become involved in religious concepts, some of which appear to be of considerable antiquity. European motifs seem to be largely absent in Iroquois mythology. In many Indian stories of suspected foreign origin we find the same motifs as in the European versions, appearing in almost the same combinations. Other tales have enough features in common with European tales for us to suspect borrowing, but we cannot be sure. Unless there are correspondences in several major features or in a number of minor ones rather than in just one feature (i.e., the occurrence of legendary dwarfs), we have no justification for assuming that a folk-feature is not indigenous in both cultures which possess it—a principle which we have attempted to apply in this paper.

Aside from the Cherokee and Iroquois traditions to which we have confined ourselves in this paper, similar concepts are to be found among many other tribes of Eastern North America.<sup>1</sup> This wealth of dwarf lore is of considerable interest when compared with old world traditions. It is our impression that a more thorough study of American belief of this type may reveal

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<sup>1</sup> The following are a few of the places in which the occurrence of legendary dwarfs among the eastern North American Indians is noted. M. R. Harrington, *Religion and Ceremonies of the Lenape* (Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, Heye foundation, New York, 1921) 49. Albert S. Gatschet, (No title, Notes on Creek dwarfs) (*JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* I, 1887) 237. F. G. Speck, *Catawba Texts* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1938) 28. F. G. Speck, *Naskapi* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1935) 72. H. Stamp, *The Water Fairies, Penobscot* (*JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* 27, 1915) 310-6.

that we can readily separate the tales of non-Indian origin and still have a large residuum which is an integral part of indigenous American cultures.

Our information about Cherokee folklore was collected at Qualla Reservation in North Carolina from some of the more conservative families of Big Cove, Birdtown, and Painttown, representative of the various clans and settlements of the Eastern Cherokee. Our own Cherokee material is followed by a discussion of published accounts.

According to Moses Owl of Birdtown, the Little People (*yunwí djunstf*) are about two feet tall and are invisible to most people. There are four kinds of these Little People; one kind lives in the rock cliffs, another sort lives in the "laurel patches" (rhododendron thickets), another lives in the "broom sage," and a fourth variety lives in the open. They are of varying temperament and it is said that those who live in the open and in the "broom sage" are very mean, while those in the rock cliffs are good-natured and inclined to be helpful. (Mooney states that the spirit of the rabbit—an evil, disease-causing spirit—lives in the "broom sage.")<sup>2</sup>

The Little People, according to tradition, look very much like the Cherokee, wear their hair very long, speak the same language, and have a culture like that of the people in whose country they reside. They are divided into seven clans, corresponding to the Cherokee clans, and hold dances and councils like the Cherokee. Sometimes they are heard singing and drumming in the mountains.

Conjurors were able to capture these dwarfs and make them do useful work. Few other persons were able to see them. A conjuror who had control over these persons could put them to work around the house, put them as guards over property, and make them mind children. He could even loan them to other persons for similar purposes.

Sometimes these tiny servants got out of hand. We were told of one instance in which a conjuror loaned two of these dwarfs to his daughter. At first they were very docile and did the housework and minded the children. However, she was not strict enough with them and they soon became unruly and caused trouble. They continually annoyed the children, making them cry and tripping them up when they walked or ran. Finally she gave them back to her father. He returned them to the place where he found them as he already had two which guarded his house and property. Upon his death, his relatives found these two Little People throwing his things about, and were prevented from taking any of his property.

Often the Little People were set to guard mines or hoards of buried treasure, as in the case of a pot of gold alleged to have been buried in Soco Gap during the Civil War. A treasure said to have been buried under a flat rock in the mountains near Charlie's Bunion at the time of the Removal (1838) had such a guard set over it. Others are said to have guarded the Cherokee gold mines which were in the territory preempted by the Whites at the time of the Removal.

<sup>2</sup> James Mooney, *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee* (Seventh Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, 1886) 342.

Although these people can generally be put to useful work by a conjuror, many of them are primarily mischievous and are always playing tricks on people. They mislead people in the woods and like to lure children away into the mountains. One little boy was said to have been led away and not found for eight weeks. When found he had forgotten how to talk and fought like a wild animal. Sometimes the Little People settle on a man and plague him, annoying his cows so that they become dry, pulling all the nails out of his roof, keeping his little pigs from suckling, and making his life generally miserable. Often they fasten themselves onto a child like an evil spirit and annoy him so that he cannot eat or sleep and becomes ill. A conjuror must be called in to relieve the victim. It is said that the Little People could and did cause the death of children as well as of older people.

A man in Birdtown was successful in a legal affair and later heard that his opponents had hired several conjurors to kill him. He was very worried but a relative of his, a young man learned in Cherokee tradition, offered to protect him. This conjuror-relative went up to the rock cliffs and enlisted the aid of the Little People, who are reputed to have effectively nullified the efforts of the conjurors and to have caused the death of three of them.

Another sort of dwarf, the nunnehi (*they live everywhere*) are recognized by Ben Bushyhead, of Birdtown, as the "good fairies of the Cherokee."

According to Molly Sequoyah, of Big Cove, the Little People (yunwí djunstí) are about two and one-half feet tall, are dressed in white, and have long hair. They live in rock slides in the cliffs where one can see "floors" that they have made—flat places that they keep swept perfectly clean. They can hear whatever you say about them. It is a bad omen to see them and death may follow.

Occasionally they live in the loft of a house and watch for intruders when the owner is not home. If anyone tries to enter they will make noises to scare him away and may injure or kill him. Once a woman in Big Cove left her baby alone in the house and when she returned she found a dwarf woman rocking the baby in its cradle.

Many years ago there was a large house-shaped rock on one of the rock-slides. This rock contained entrances to caves with many rooms. If one drummed on this rock, the Little People inside began to drum and dance and shout. One man wouldn't believe this so he went there and drummed on the rock for a long time. Finally the Little People came out and chased him. He escaped, but was thoroughly frightened.

At another place was a similar rock, but without caves. Just after the smallpox epidemic which followed the Civil War Molly's mother and some other children were playing there one day, shouting and having a good time. Soon they could hear and feel invisible sticks and stones being thrown at them. They were scared away but after a while they forgot and went back. Again the Little People threw things at them and chased them away. They told their mothers what had happened. The older people told the children to stay away from that place or the Little People might throw them down the cliff.

According to Will West Long of Big Cove, there are probably four kinds or "tribes" of the Little People (yunwí djunstí, *invisible little human beings*), which are known by name, but are not otherwise characterized. These are niwósi (*very small*), nunnehí (*living anywhere*), dedzat'n, and nayohi unehí (*those who live where it is rocky*). The last are said to be the thunders and are almost as big as a man. All these kinds of Little People live in rocky places and make "floors" on the rock slides. It is very bad to see any of the Little People, and is often a cause or a sign of death. The Little People can appear to a conjuror and cause his death, but some conjurors also know incantations with which they can kill Little People. Molly Sequoyah recognizes dedzat'n as another name for the Little People.

Once Will's brother-in-law was hunting ginseng in a very rocky place in the mountains. He saw a number of Little People who were living in this place. When he returned home he told his wife what he had seen. He died five months later, but would probably have lived longer if he had not told about the Little People. It is bad enough to see these Little People, but it is sure to result in death if you tell anyone else that you have seen them.

Twins are able to see and talk with the Little People, but they lose this power if they eat food prepared by a menstruating woman. Once there were twin boys, about twelve years old, who were raised in Big Cove and who occasionally went to a rock slide and played with the Little People. Their parents missed them several times and finally forced them to tell where they had been. As a result of confessing that they had seen the Little People, they soon died.

Olbrechts states that twins who are raised on a special medicine become witches and are able to see the Little People.<sup>3</sup> According to Will West Long, anyone can be raised as a witch, but he does not know of any twins who were; neither is the ability to see the Little People a trait of witches.

These observations from different informants show the wealth of tradition concerning the Little People and demonstrate the various personalities of the dwarfs with whom we are dealing; when our data are compared with the published accounts, a variety of opinion and yet a general agreement is noted in the various traditions concerning dwarfs.

Mooney's account of the Little People (yunwi tsunsdí), whom he does not always differentiate from other spirit peoples, does not emphasize their mischievous, dangerous, and unpredictable nature. He describes them as having long hair and as being wonder workers and kindly assistants. They help lost persons, especially children. They are sometimes heard singing and drumming in the hills, but it is not safe to go to their haunts for they will throw a spell over a person so that he loses his way and remains dazed even after he is rescued. At night they often do work for people such as harvesting corn, but if one watches them, he will die. Any lost article found in the woods belongs to them and if the finder wants it, he must say, "Little People, I want to take this," or they will stone him. They sheltered and fed one man for a

<sup>3</sup> James Mooney, *The Swimmer Manuscript*, ed. F. M. Olbrechts (Bulletin 99, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, 1932) 130.

time, but they told him that he would die if he said anything about it. After a time he let the secret out and soon died. They cured another man of small-pox. In one town they had always helped the Indians, but once the people offended them and saw them enter a cave, never to be heard of again.<sup>4</sup>

Olbrechts states that the Little People (yunwi tsunsdí) and the Mountain People (ᵛ'Dali aᵛe'i) cause accidents. They are about forty centimeters tall, and are invisible. They speak Cherokee, hold dances and councils, and build town houses. However, they cause disease; children especially are their victims.<sup>5</sup>

The Little People also play minor roles in the more formal mythology. One of our informants thought that the "wild boy" in the tale of Kanati and Selu may have had some connection with the Little People. According to Mooney they gave the kingfisher his long bill. Their advice was partially responsible for the origin of man. Later they helped man in his attempt to capture the sun, and tried to bring the sun's daughter back from the land of the dead.<sup>6</sup> These features give the impression of being recent accretions, especially as they are present only in some variants of the stories.

Mooney lists by name two dwarfs, Tsawási and Tsagasi, who seem to be special little tricksters. Détsata (dedzat'n, to whom we have referred before) is a little boy who ran away from home to avoid punishment. He hides arrows and plays minor tricks, and unruly children are threatened that he will come for them. It is suggested that he may cause diseases, especially of children.<sup>7</sup> He is said to be a mean little dwarf who lives in caves in the river bluffs. Sometimes he seems to be a whole class of spirits rather than an individual.<sup>8</sup>

There is another class of supernatural beings which Mooney considered very similar to the Little People—the nunnéhi (*I dwell habitually*), whom we have already mentioned. However, it is not certain that they were dwarfs and they seem always to be helpful and kindly toward mankind. They are referred to as the spirits of deceased Indians who carry on their old way of life not far from the living people. (They are mentioned by our informants as a type of the Little People, but not much else seems to be remembered concerning them.) They have sometimes helped the Cherokee in times of danger and are said to have warned them of danger at crucial times in Cherokee history. Before the Removal they invited the occupants of several villages to come and live with them and the new houses of these towns could later be seen at a certain place in the bottom of a river.<sup>9</sup> These nunnéhi may be the spirits who lead the souls of the dead through the highways of the streams up to the springs which are the doors to the underworld.<sup>10</sup> They very likely have some connection with the Water Dwellers (yuni ama 'yine' hi) who live in

<sup>4</sup> James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (Nineteenth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, 1898) 333-4, 455.

<sup>5</sup> Mooney, *Swimmer Manuscript* 18, 25, 284.

<sup>6</sup> Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* 253, 289, 430, 436, 455.

<sup>7</sup> Mooney, *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee* 341, 354.

<sup>8</sup> Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees* 334, 335, 476, 535, 536.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 330, 335, 354, 476.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 240.

the bottoms of the deep holes of the rivers.<sup>11</sup> Mooney also tells of an underwater people who were cannibal spirits and who stole sleeping persons, leaving a "shade" instead.<sup>12</sup>

We were told several stories about Salolé (*gray squirrel*), a Cherokee gunsmith and blacksmith who died prior to 1900. He still returns as a revenant and has been seen to come up from the river to the spot where his house and shop once stood, and later to return to the river. It is believed that he died without revealing where his money and tools were hidden, and that now he is attempting to contact his relatives in order to show them the hiding place. He was a skillful blacksmith and made excellent rifles of a unique pattern.

A story was told by Moses Owl of Birdtown of a strange girl (a Water Dweller) who once appeared at one of the Cherokee dances. A young man was greatly smitten with her and followed her home. He finally managed to catch her. She agreed to marry him and told him to follow her into the river, saying, "It is really only a road." He went with her and found a world under the river much like the one he had left. He met her family and friends and stayed there for a long time as her husband. Later he returned home, only to discover that several generations of Cherokee had lived and died in what had seemed to him a few years.

Of a very different sort are the *anisgáya tsundí*, the Thunder Boys, who live above the sky vault. These are true mythological figures, the tame boy and the wild boy, who are the sons of Kanati and Selu (the Hunter and the Corn Mother), and who are central figures in the tale of the origin of corn and game.<sup>13</sup> In the more systematic Cherokee folklore they appear in several tales which Mooney considered part of a now-lost cycle of origin myths.<sup>14</sup> They are invoked in several of the conjuror's formulae, and are "beneficent and powerful."<sup>15</sup> The short, sharp claps of thunder are made by them, but the great thunder of a severe storm seems to emanate from Kanati. The Thunders wear snakes as necklaces and bracelets.<sup>16</sup>

According to Will West Long of Big Cove, the thunders are known as *nayohi unehí*. They live in the rock cliffs and go up into the sky to play ball, which causes a thunder storm. They will listen to you if you invoke them properly, and some conjurors are said to be able to control thunderstorms. According to Molly Sequoyah of Big Cove, a ball made of red string is used in the Indian ball game as played in the Big Cove, since that is like the ball used by the Thunders.

Will West Long told of a man who was fishing by a secluded stream in the mountains. He built a fire beside a large hole and sat down to fish. As he sat there he began to feel very melancholy and lonesome. Then he began to hear someone singing, "gu ní, gu ní." He looked up and saw a person sitting on a large rock in the middle of the stream, facing in the opposite direction.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 547, 334, 345.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 349-50

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 242, 256, 345, 435, 441, 509. Mooney, *Swimmer Manuscript*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* 430.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 438.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 436.

This person was wearing bright blue clothes and a blue, pointed cap. The man left quietly and returned home, feeling very lonesome and strangely unhappy. He had seen a Thunder (*nayohi unehí*).

One story is told by Moses Owl of Birdtown is relevant enough to include here as a representative formal myth about the Thunder brothers.

Once a young man fell in love with a strange girl at a dance and followed her home. He caught up with her and she agreed to marry him. They went a long way up into the mountains to her house, and were welcomed by her mother.

The next day they told him they were expecting the girl's two brothers. Later he heard a terrible thundering and roaring and the Thunders rode up mounted on huge rattlesnakes. They seemed pleased to have another man in the family and said that he could help them with their work, but they looked uncomfortable and complained that something smelled in the house. They were not human and so were very sensitive to the odor of a man. However, they assured him that he would quickly lose his human scent, and invited him to play ball with them the next day. They asked him to stable their "horses" for them in order to try his courage. He was very frightened, but he managed to lead the snakes off and put them away without showing fear.

Early the next morning they told him to get onto a third snake and come with them. He was terribly frightened but he climbed on and rode a long way with them until they came to a ball-ground. Here they got out their sticks and began a ball-stick game. This was his third trial for they used a human skull as a ball. When he saw it come flying at him with its jaws agape he was afraid, but he thought of his wife and played well. So he proved his courage and became the third Thunder. He can be heard sometimes traveling across the sky with his brother-Thunders, who make a louder noise than he does.

According to Will West Long of Big Cove, the Thunders and the Little People are invoked in the conjuror's formulae as Little Red Men, Little Yellow Men, Little Purple Men, Little Blue Men, Little White Men, and Little Black Men. These titles pertain to the Cherokee color symbolism and do not differentiate between the various types of Thunders and Little People. However, they are often referred to as twins when the Thunders are meant. All of these people are helpful except the Little Black Men. Black is a color symbolic of evil and danger.

Among the northern Iroquoian peoples we find no such multiplicity of dwarfs as occurs among the Cherokee.<sup>17</sup> There is one well-recognized species of tiny spirit known to the various tribes of the Six Nations. The Seneca call dwarfs *dju'ngáo* (Sherman Redeye, Allegany Reservation) and the Mohawk, *yagodínya yú'yocks* (*they throw stones*) (Mrs. Susan Hill, Six Nations Reserve). The Onondaga name for them is *tcigahé'ya* (Levi Batiste,

<sup>17</sup> After visiting the Cherokee some time was spent at Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, Canada, and at Allegany Reservation, New York, where studies were made of Iroquois mythological figures.

Six Nations) and among the Cayuga they are called *djugat*, while the male is called *degala* (*my story?*) and the female *tcegá·ha*. The Tuscarora know them as *ogwés·ha·i* (*Little People*) (Cornelius Owens, Six Nations). The Wyandot, according to Barbeau, call the Little People *tikaén'a* (*twins*).<sup>18</sup>

These dwarfs are a species of tiny beings who live in the woods and rocky places and hunt with slings for their livelihood. A Cayuga medicine bundle which we obtained at Six Nations includes a tiny sling and several sling-stones which had belonged to the Little People. The great skill and luck in hunting of the latter would no doubt be transferred to anyone possessing one of their weapons.

According to Cayuga tradition there are two such dwarfs—twins, a male and a female. They hunt with slings and stones and are able to injure or kill people who offend them. They have control over certain illnesses and the Dark Dance Feast is performed in part for them, in part for other spiritual beings. They also sometimes participate in the Dream Guessing Feast.<sup>19</sup>

M. R. Harrington describes some tiny human figures carved from date pits and sewed to a picture; these represented the little people called "Stone Rollers," who offered help in dreams, and whose aid had been invoked on behalf of the person whose photograph they accompanied. This no doubt refers to the Dream Guessing Feast.<sup>20</sup>

R. J. Weitlaner writes that the dwarfs were last seen at Allegany Reservation, New York. Over a century ago a hunter saw two of them on Cattaraugus Creek, but they escaped from him.<sup>21</sup> These dwarfs (*djagáo*) once met some children near the same place and sheltered them overnight and fed them.

Cornelius Owens, a Tuscarora of Six Nations Reserve whose Indian name is *Ga·hos* (*Old Man*), saw a pair of Little People (*ogwés·ha·i*) about fifty years ago. They were walking along a road on the Tuscarora Reserve at Six Nations and he drove past them with a wagon and team. He remembered that they paid no attention to him and that they were about two feet tall and dressed in fine clothes. Such Little People still live everywhere in the woods. They know where a person is going to hunt and will drive away the game if the hunter has insulted or misused them. They make their living entirely by hunting and are able to "witch" persons who injure them and may cause death.

Morgan, writing in 1851, mentions that "There were fables of a race of

<sup>18</sup> C. M. Barbeau, *Huron and Wyandot Mythology* (Canadian Department of Mines Memoir 80, Anthropological series number eleven, Ottawa, 1915) 111.

<sup>19</sup> See: M. R. Harrington, *The Dark Dance of Jigeonh* (*Masterkey* 7, 1933) 76-9. H. Converse, *Iroquois Myths and Legends*, ed. A. C. Parker. (New York State Museum Bulletin 125, 1908) 101-7. A. C. Parker, *The Code of Handsome Lake* (New York State Museum Bulletin 163, 1913) 119.

<sup>20</sup> M. R. Harrington, *Some Unusual Iroquois Specimens* (*American Anthropologist*, N. S. 11, 1909) 9.

<sup>21</sup> R. J. Weitlaner, *Seneca Tales and Beliefs* (*JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* 16, 1915) 310.

pigmies who dwelt within the earth, but who were endued with such herculean strength as to tear up the forest oak by its roots and shoot it from their bows."<sup>22</sup>

Barbeau tells of a hunter who found a dwarf woman hiding in a tree. He saw her foot, which resembled a duck's, and pulled her down out of the tree. She held a baby in her arms, bound to a cradleboard with wrappings woven from the hair of many kinds of animals. He took the baby away from her and teased her, saying that he was going to keep her baby. He noticed that she had no elbow-joints. Finally she ransomed the baby with a hunting charm and the man was always a successful hunter after that.<sup>23</sup>

At Lorette the Huron showed Barbeau some footprints of dwarfs on a stone. Some Hurons once met three very old little men paddling a stone canoe several day's journey from Lorette. These Little People spoke in Huron and said they had left Lorette less than an hour before.<sup>24</sup>

Parker places the Seneca Little People (*jogáo*) next in importance to human beings. They are very powerful and demand proper attention, wreaking vengeance on those who neglect them. The Dark Dance Society sings for them and for medicine charms and magical animals. Persons who hear the Little People or "Stone Throwers" drumming (thus signifying their desire for a feast) call for the Dark Dance. The members save their fingernail parings and throw them over the cliffs for the Little People.<sup>25</sup>

A story told by Levi Batiste of Six Nations Reserve is said to have some connection with the origin of the Dark Dance. Once some people found all of the Little People (here spoken of as little witches) in a hole in the ground. They went and got a very strong man who was eighteen years old to come and drop a big stone into the hole and seal them all in. The stone was nicked, however, so that the Little People had enough space to squeeze out past it. Since then they have been free and people have had to placate them by feasts. By the time the man who had placed the stone over them got back home he was ninety-six years old. No one recognized him, even his younger sister, until he told her that just before he had left he had tripped her when she was carrying a bucket of corn soup, and had made her spill it.

An interesting explanation of the relationship of these spirits to the Iroquois people was offered by Deskaheh, a Cayuga chief at Six Nations Reserve. He suggested that the Indians had been in America so long and had been in such intimate contact with their natural environment that they had formed relationships with beings and things of which Europeans had no knowledge. Since the Whites have cleared the land, some of the relationships have changed. The spirit animals now need more attention and the Little People have withdrawn to the westward and are now rarely seen—although

<sup>22</sup> Lewis H. Morgan, *The League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* (Rochester, 1851) 166.

<sup>23</sup> C. M. Barbeau, *Huron and Wyandot Mythology* (Canadian Department of Mines, *Memoir 80*. Anthropological series number eleven, Ottawa, 1915) 111-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 65, Pl. 10A.

<sup>25</sup> Parker, *Code of Handsome Lake* 119.

their presence is sometimes very real and they have not severed their connections with the Indian people.

At the same time he offered the idea that the Dark Dance kept the Little People pacified so that the Iroquois have little trouble or direct contact with them. Lacking these contacts, they have few stories about them and those they have are quite uniform. If they did not have the Dark Dance Feast, they might be bothered by a multitude of such beings and know more about different kinds of dwarfs and their attributes, as do the Cherokee.

These suggestions are of considerable interest when we consider the possibility that Iroquois society rituals have increased greatly in importance and complexity in historic times.

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